

The Seduction of Success
Genesis 14
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What is your passion in life? Is there one controlling purpose that governs all you do? Sometimes people are not even aware of what compels them in life. They rather routinely get up each day, work hard and play hard and are not even particularly conscious of why they do what they do. Still others have known exactly what they wanted in life and have set their sights on very particular things such as a certain job, a particular recognition, or a specific kind of retirement. Still others have ordered their lives to attain lesser things – a certain automobile, a dream vacation, or a larger house.

I shall never forget the family I visited several years ago. Within very few minutes of meeting the family, the husband and father of that household took me to the kitchen to show me a picture on his refrigerator. The picture was of a very handsome and obviously expensive automobile – I have forgotten the brand. As the man showed me the picture he unabashedly declared this car as the goal of his life. His thinking, his dreaming, his days, his evenings, his weekends were consumed with gaining the money through his multi-level marketing plan to obtain this goal and the financial freedom that it represented.

In contrast, there is, in the book of Philippians, the most eloquent statement ever made by a person about why he lives each day. As we continue our study of the book of Genesis in a few minutes I hope the relevance of this statement by the Apostle Paul will become evident. Again I ask, what is your passion in life?

Philippians 3:4b-21

“If anyone else thinks he has reasons to put confidence in the flesh, I have more... But whatever was to my profit I now consider loss for the sake of Christ. ⁸ What is more, I consider everything a loss compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them rubbish, that I may gain Christ ⁹ and be found in him... I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of sharing in his

sufferings, becoming like him in his death,¹¹ and so, somehow, to attain to the resurrection from the dead... I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus...¹⁸ For, as I have often told you before and now say again even with tears, many live as enemies of the cross of Christ... Their mind is on earthly things.²⁰ But our citizenship is in heaven. And we eagerly await a Savior from there, the Lord Jesus Christ,²¹ who, by the power that enables him to bring everything under his control, will transform our lowly bodies so that they will be like his glorious body.

What is your passion in life? And by whose genius and energy will it be accomplished? My desire is that by the end of this message you and I would have Paul's passion renewed in us. My desire is that we would reaffirm our commitment to the expansion of the kingdom of God as the passion of our lives and our complete reliance on his power to bring that kingdom to fulfillment.

Look with me now please at the book of Genesis chapters 13 & 14. I want you to see what generated my question about your passion in life. Most of you have read the story before –maybe many times. In chapter 13 Abram's and his nephew Lot's herds were too large to stay near each other so Abram gave Lot the first choice of where he wanted to live. Lot chose the well-watered land of the southern end of the Jordan River and the Dead Sea. Not only did he move to the fringes or beyond of the land God promised to Abram and his family but he chose to live among the pagan people of the area – 13:12-13 says, He "pitched his tents near Sodom. Now the men of Sodom were wicked and were sinning greatly against the Lord." By the time we hear of Lot again in chapter 14 we learn that he is now living in Sodom and later we learn he is a leading citizen.

Chapter 14 however is not mainly about Lot but about Abram. The following story seems to me, to be great material for a screenplay. I can imagine a motion picture being made. During the years that Abram and Lot were living in the land of Canaan four kings from what is today the areas of Iraq and Turkey allied with each other and sent an army into southern Canaan subjecting five of the kings of the area for 12 years.

For 12 years those kings of Sodom, Gomorrah, Admah, Zeboiim and Bela had been paying heavy taxes to these other kings. But in the 13th year they rebelled. When that word got back to the four kings they again formed an army and invaded the area of Canaan. According to verses 5-7 they started in the northern part of Canaan and worked their way south defeating every lesser king on the way. Then in verse 8 and following we learn that the five kings of Sodom, Gomorrah, etc. joined forces and met the invading army near the southern end of the Dead Sea. But the king of Sodom and the others were soundly defeated. And the four invading kings this time left little. They went into the defeated cities and took everything not nailed down including Lot and everything he owned.

Abram lived near Hebron, a little further west and apparently was considered so insignificant a force that the invading kings did not bother him. But someone escaped the battle scene and came to Abram telling him what had happened – particularly the part about Lot being taken captive. At that point in the story, Abram gathered his own men together and also called on some neighboring kings to join him. Together they set out to go after Lot and the possessions that were stolen. You are almost forced to wonder what Abram was thinking. How could he possibly expect to defeat an army of four kings?

Caution aside, Abram and his allies caught up to the four kings 180 miles north near the northern end of Canaan at a site that later would be called Dan. Remember they were on foot. Strategically dividing his men to attack along several fronts and catching the enemy in the night, Abram routed the enemy army and chased them for another 50 miles. He finally let the rest go after they got north of Damascus.

With Lot, all the other captives from Sodom, Gomorrah and the other cities, all the cattle, and all the possessions, Abram and the others made their way back toward home over that 200-plus miles. What a hero Abram must have been! Imagine the recounting of the stories as they make their way home. When they got to what is probably near the northern end of the Dead Sea, at least two area kings came out to meet them. The King of Sodom, whose city had been decimated and whose people and possessions had been taken captive came to meet Abram. And the King of Salem (probably the

city that is later called Jerusalem), a man by the name of Melchizedek also came out to meet him.

Melchizedek, the king of Salem, blessed Abram while the king of Sodom tried to strike a deal with him. Abram responded positively to the king of Salem by giving him a king's reward, a tenth of what they had recovered in battle but Abram refused the offer of the king of Sodom. Thus ends the story. The white hats win, justice is served and everyone lives happily ever after.

So why did Moses, the author of Genesis, tell this particular story? Was he interested in demonstrating Abram's military genius – helping to make him a larger than life character in the minds of his readers? Was he interested in showing Abram's loyalty and kindness to family in spite of Lot's selfishness – demonstrating Abram's superior virtues? Was the point of the story to introduce us to Melchizedek?

I puzzled for several hours over the purpose of this story. Like you, I operate with a view of Scripture that God gave us when he said, "All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting, and training in righteousness..." It wasn't until I connected the first verse of chapter 15 to this incident that the purpose became clearer to me. That verse says this: "After this (After what? After Abram's experience in battle and with the kings of Salem and Sodom) the word of the Lord came to Abram in a vision: 'Do not be afraid, Abram. I am your shield, your very great reward.'" **God came to Abram and reiterated two truths that Abram needed to remember clearly, two truths that he had just been sorely tempted to forget – God is Abram's protection and God is Abram's reward.** I have titled this passage and this message, "The seduction of success."

Abram's faith was tested when he was asked to leave his country and his family and go to a land that God would show him. Abram's faith was tested when he went into Egypt and his life was threatened. Abram's faith was tested when he had to make a choice between what looked like the better land and the land that God said he should stay in. **And in chapter 14 Abram's faith is tested again – but this time it is not tested by adversity but by success.** Imagine with me the emotional "high" Abram must have been on as he and the others

traveled south after defeating the kings and recapturing Lot and the others and all the possessions. Imagine the swelling pride as the kings of Salem and Sodom came out to meet him. The conquering hero has come, bow down everyone. Abram's stock couldn't have been higher – he was truly king of the mountain – the entire area was beholden to him. How could he help but hear as they told and retold the story of his mental genius, his military prowess, his great success? How could he help but think, "By my hand I have achieved this status and this wealth - not bad for an old man!" Self-sufficiency loomed large. HE had done it! What can stop me now? The world is my oyster!

*But self-sufficiency was not the only temptation. The King of Sodom made him an offer that would be hard to refuse. "Give me the people and keep the goods for yourself." Abram was already well off but can you imagine his social position if he accepted the offer? He would undoubtedly have been the wealthiest man in the entire area. The temptation to have more must have been great – Abram had opportunity and he had the right to it. Imagine yourself in that place – the wealth is yours for the taking and you have a right to it – what would you do? Don't get me wrong. The problem here is not in having some wealth. The issue here is the focus and passion of one's life. For Abram at that moment, possessions loomed large. They could easily become the controlling passion of his life. Do you see why I call this passage "The seduction of success?" **It was not in adversity but in success that Abram met the largest test of his faith to date.***

A friend recently reminded me of a quote from the Scottish writer, Thomas Carlyle. It says it well. "Adversity is hard on a man; but for one man who can stand prosperity, there are a hundred that will stand adversity." Maintaining your dependence on God and keeping your eyes focused on the eternal values and goals of life are much harder when we are seduced by success than when we are buffeted by adversity.

Moses knew exactly what he was doing in telling this story to the Israelites. His people were about to enter the land of Canaan again after living in slavery in Egypt for 400 years. During the 40 years they lived in the desert after leaving Egypt, they were honed into a tough

*fighting force. And they were about to enter a land that was rich. So Moses not only told this story about Abram but he made the same point when he wrote these words in Deuteronomy 8:10-18: “When you have eaten and are satisfied, praise the LORD your God for the good land he has given you. Be careful that you do not forget the LORD your God, failing to observe his commands, his laws and his decrees that I am giving you this day. Otherwise, when you eat and are satisfied, when you build fine houses and settle down, and when your herds and flocks grow large and your silver and gold increase and all you have is multiplied, then your heart will become proud and you will forget the LORD your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery... You may say to yourself, **‘MY power and the strength of MY hands have produced this wealth for me.’** But remember the LORD your God, for it is he who gives you the ability to produce wealth...”*

The great double temptation that Abram faced was to lose sight of the source of his strength and the goal of his life. *God said I am your shield and I am your reward. Success said, “You are self-sufficient Abram and ‘more’ is the goal of your life.”*

How did Abram respond to this double temptation? God did a gracious thing for Abram. In chapter 14 verse 17, it says “...The king of Sodom came out to meet (Abram).” But before the king of Sodom can make his seductive offer in verse 21 the king of Salem steps in at verse 18. God uses this king, Melchizedek, to remind Abram to whom Abram belongs and by whose power he lives and succeeds. The king of Salem brought out a meal and sat down with Abram and then blessed him. Apparently Abram recognized Melchizedek for who he was. Verse 18 says of this king of Salem, “He was priest of God Most High...” And the blessing is not so much about Abram as it is about God. Verses 19 and 20 say, “Blessed be Abram by God Most High, Creator of heaven and earth. And blessed be God Most High, who delivered your enemies into your hand.”

What’s the message? Don’t believe the press releases Abram! Don’t get trapped by your success into thinking YOU have done this Abram. Not only has God created you but also your success was nothing short of the miraculous intervention of God. God is your shield, your king, your protection Abram! And so the seduction of self-sufficiency

is neutralized and so is the seduction of wealth as Abram's goal in life.

*So how does Abram respond? He immediately got the message and did what every God-follower through the ages has done to demonstrate it. He gave a tenth of everything he had to this representative of God Most High. His act of tithing meant that Abram acknowledged that **everything** he had belonged to God – Abram was not the owner he was just the steward. And so by the time the king of Sodom opened his mouth with his seductive offer, God had prepared Abram. The king of Sodom would have Abram focus his attention of wealth. The king of Sodom would have Abram form a financial alliance, even a financial dependence on the wicked men of their cities. But Abram says "No!" "I have raised my hand to the Lord, God Most High, Creator of heaven and earth, and have taken an oath that I will accept nothing belonging to you, not even a threat or the thong of a sandal, so that you will never be able to say 'I have made Abram rich.'"*

No, my reward is God, not what you or anyone else gives me. The goal of my life must remain God's purposes for me. I will not, I cannot, be distracted from what is most important in life by things as fleeting as wealth and power. Abram's success tempted him with power over a few petty kings when God offered him influence over the peoples of the world. Abram's success tempted him with the wealth of a few miserable little cities 4000 years ago when God offered him the wealth of a family greater in number than the sands of the earth.

What is your passion in life? Have you been seduced by success? Has a measure of success in education, career, or finances lured you into living life as if the power is yours – you are self-sufficient. Has a measure of success lured you into viewing the goal of your life as something as temporal and petty as financial security, self-indulgent kids, or even a newer car? The seduction of success is that you can have a little more of the good life here and now. But the call of God is to a future that exceeds the imaginable. As He did Abram, so God has called us to something far larger, more significant, and eternal. Through us God intends to bless the peoples of this world. Would we settle for the self-sufficiency that can produce a fat stock portfolio or a

shiny new car when we have access to the power of God to help transform a world?

Hear the Apostle Paul again and ask if this is your passion in life. "If anyone else thinks he has reasons to put confidence in the flesh, I have more... But whatever was to my profit I now consider loss for the sake of Christ. ⁸ What is more, I consider everything a loss compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them rubbish, that I may gain Christ ⁹ and be found in him... I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of sharing in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, ¹¹ and so, somehow, to attain to the resurrection from the dead... I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus...¹⁸ For, as I have often told you before and now say again even with tears, many live as enemies of the cross of Christ... Their mind is on earthly things. ²⁰ But our citizenship is in heaven. And we eagerly await a Savior from there, the Lord Jesus Christ, ²¹ who, by the power that enables him to bring everything under his control, will transform our lowly bodies so that they will be like his glorious body.

On whom do you depend (yourself or God)? And for what are you living your life?